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# **Education Matters: Continuity and Change in Attitudes to Education and Social Mobility among the Offspring of Turkish Guest Workers in the Netherlands and Austria**

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## **Abstract**

By comparing the educational situation of second generation Turks in the Netherlands and Austria the paper investigates the reasons behind the differential higher educational gains of the descendants of guest workers in the two countries. By relying on in-depth interviews with second-generation Turks the paper illustrates how ethnic discrimination in the labour market lead to maintaining a “sojourn-perspective” among Turks in the Austrian setting, who disapprove of long-term educational investments in favour of material resources enabling a potential return to Turkey. At the same time, the sojourn-orientation is giving way to a more long-term perspective in the case of the Netherlands, where Turkish families see investments in Dutch qualifications as worthwhile channels of upward mobility.

**Keywords:** higher education; second generation; Turks; social mobility; Austria; Netherlands

## **Introduction**

The socio-economic disadvantages faced by first generation migrants have been widely documented within the American and European contexts, but as their children were leaving school and entering the labour market the situation of the second generation came to the foreground. Research on the second generation has been long dominated by the US debate of segmented assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut and Portes 2001). This perspective has made clear that the educational and labour market outcomes of different origin groups tend to differ in a given host country, even after controlling for the background characteristics. As van Tubergen (van Tubergen, Maas and Flap 2004) later pointed out, the less economically advanced the origin country relative to the destination country, the worse immigrants will perform in terms of schooling and labour market.

Within Europe scholarly interest turned to Turkish labour migrants who were by far the largest migrant group totalling four million people spread across six countries<sup>1</sup>. Having arrived from the least urbanised areas of Turkey with very little or no schooling suggested an intergenerational reproduction of inequalities. However, the children of the Turkish guest workers have challenged the existing models of integration since they showed differing levels of second generation “successes” in spite of the similar “starting positions”(Crul and Vermeulen 2003).

While Turkish children were generally performing less well in education than majority children in all countries of settlement (due to the low level of parental education and the lack of knowledge of the local school systems), there were marked differences between the educational and social advancement of second generation Turks across countries (Author 2009). In certain contexts, such as Austria, only a very small number of second generation Turks succeeded in entering higher education. In other settings, such as the Netherlands, young people of Turkish origin entered the higher education sector in

proportions approaching that of other minority ethnic groups and the majority. Hence, the aim of this paper is to explore the potential reasons behind the differential higher education participation among the descendants of Turkish immigrants in these two destination countries.

### **Mapping the Educational Landscape**

There is much discussion in relation to why second generation Turks exhibit higher educational and occupational gains in one host society than in other. Considering the educational system itself, the educational situation of second generation Turks is inevitably influenced by the characteristics of the respective school systems at national level.

Considering the specific characteristics of stratified school systems, such as the Dutch and the Austrian, prior research has indicated that both majority and ethnic minority students have, on average, higher scores in comprehensive educational systems compared to highly stratified ones (Allmendiger 1989). This means that students who follow the same curriculum up to age 14 or 16 generally score higher than those channelled into different school tracks early on (Breen and Jonsson 2000). By reducing their educational achievement (de Heus and Dronkers 2010), tracking puts immigrant children at significant disadvantage by closing down the most ambitious avenues – such as higher education – at an early point in their educational trajectory. As a result, early selection is associated with greater social class inequalities while educational systems delaying the time of selection tend to be more egalitarian (Breen and Jonsson 2005, Kerkhoff 1995).

Exactly the process of early selection appears to hinder the children of immigrants in Austria where school starts at the age of six. The first four years of schooling do not necessarily allow Turkish pupils to catch up with their peers as they first have to come to

terms with learning the German language (Author 2008). Thus the selection point at the age of ten disadvantages immigrant children who are often Early selection is generally associated with greater social class inequalities while educational systems delaying the time of selection tend to be more egalitarian (Breen and Jonsson 2005, Kerkhoff 1995). Early selection is generally associated with greater social class inequalities while educational systems delaying the time of selection tend to be more egalitarian (Breen and Jonsson 2005, Kerkhoff 1995). As a consequence, many side-tracked pupils leave school at the end of compulsory schooling (at the age of 15) without much possibility of return as, for example, higher education is not directly accessible for students who didn't obtain a *Matura* (secondary school leaving exam) beforehand (Bildung in Zahlen 2013:16).

The educational situation of second generation Turks in Austria well reflects that of their parents, three quarter of which had no more than compulsory schooling (77%) upon arrival to Austria (Author 2008). Their children who use the Turkish language at home are likely to be found in the least selective secondary school tracks, while many are channelled to special schools. In the ninth grade, which is the last year of compulsory schooling, almost half of Turkish children (44.8%) attend the polytechnics (i.e. the least selective pre-vocational school track), and further 25.5% the BMS, neither of which offer access to higher education studies (Bildung in Zahlen 2013:29). For those without a *Matura* there is an additional route to higher education, via special entrance exams<sup>2</sup> granting the right to access higher education courses. But altogether only a relatively low proportion of second generation Turks takes this route to higher education thus their participation rate stays relatively low in Austria (Author 2009).

Conversely, within the similarly stratified Dutch educational system, school starts at the age of four and the first selection point is at age twelve, leaving few more years for pupils to develop their abilities, show their potential and gain fluency in the language of

instruction. Although many follow the vocational route and some drop out of school without gaining a secondary school certificate, a growing proportion of young people succeed in entering higher education (Crul 2000).

According to educational statistics about half of the children with migration background would generally follow the vocational track in the Netherlands while only about 22% attend tracks with direct access to higher education. Nevertheless, a further 15% access HE indirectly, through the “long route”, i.e. by moving up the educational ladder step-by-step until reaching a level which provides direct access to higher education, most commonly to vocational college (Author 2009). Even though it can increase the educational career by up to three years, this type of indirect access is a commonly used strategy by Turkish students wanting to offset the disadvantages of early tracking (Author 2009). Overall, owing to both direct and indirect access, about one third of the second generation (from the 18-20 age cohort) would attend higher education courses in the Netherlands which is more than twice as high as the participation rate of Turks in Austria (Jennissen and Hartgens 2006).

Overall, similarities largely prevail over dissimilarities when comparing the Austrian and the Dutch educational setting. In spite of differences in the age of entry and the age at first selection point, the proportion of those pupils who end up in vocational tracks is alike in both countries. Conversely, a similar proportion, about 20% of young people has direct access to higher education in both Austria and the Netherlands. Hence, the highly stratified education system alone cannot explain the differential educational outcomes of second generation Turks across the two contexts. Rather, the data point at potentially diverse interactions between the institutional arrangements of the educational systems and the agencies of second generation Turks and their communities across these countries since the indirect opportunities of higher education access were taken up in The

Netherlands but not in Austria. Therefore, qualitative research has been proposed to explore the possible reasons behind the growing interest in higher education in one country compared to the other, assuming that potential differences in educational attitudes and aspirations might translate into different educational outcomes for the offspring of Turkish guest workers.

### **The Research Study**

The paper draws upon in-depth interviews carried out in the cities of Amsterdam and Vienna with young second generation Turks who successfully enrolled into a higher education study or recently graduated from one. The capital city locations were selected in order to ensure comparability. It is also expected that in larger cities the potential demand for an educated labour force is higher providing good return on educational investments. There are many higher education institutions available in both cities offering young people ample opportunities for further study while allowing them to reduce costs by not having to move out of the parental home. Given that higher education is state-supported in both countries – fees are low and students are offered financial support – costs should not be a deterrent when considering further studies.

As for the sample, in the Netherlands, respondents were selected through an international survey (TIES: The Integration of the European Second Generation<sup>3</sup>) which aimed to study the Turkish second generation across eight European countries. While the vast majority of respondents agreed to be re-interviewed in the Dutch sample, the proportion of those agreeing to a further interview turned out to be rather small in Austria. As a result, additional interviewees had to be sought in Vienna, where the author relied on the snowball technique<sup>4</sup> (hence the lower number of interviews there). At the end, sixteen interviews were carried out in the Netherlands and ten in Austria, ranging from one to two

and half hours. Although the samples are by no means representative, the interviewees successfully represented higher education students in terms of a variety of social backgrounds, schooling trajectories and higher education institutions in both of the studied countries. The mentioned student interviews were supplemented with personal observations of the researcher during fieldwork and some background interviews with high school teachers and university lecturers from the Turkish community, as well as additional data sources.

Overall, there was a good gender balance in both samples; in terms of age, the interviewees were aged between 25 and 29 years. Most interviewees were from humanities and social sciences in both countries, with a minority of students studying life sciences, medicine, engineering or else. Finally, regarding parental background, about half of the interviewees fathers had no - or less than five years - schooling in both samples.

In terms of methodology, semi-structured interview questions were aimed at identifying the attitudes and aspirations of young people and their parents with respect to higher education and social mobility while examining their school careers and educational decisions in great detail. Subsequently, thematic analysis had been performed in order to interpret the findings within the two settings.

### **Turkish Labour Migration to Europe**

Turkish labour migration dates back to the 1960s when Turkey entered into labour migration agreements with many western European countries. In line with the demand of European industries needing non- and semi-skilled labour Turkish migrants were negatively selected in terms of their human capital. Being recruited from the lower socio-economic strata Turkish guest-workers had very limited educational background, mostly a



few years of formal schooling, while some of them were illiterate. They were generally leaving behind the rural areas of Turkey where every hand was needed to support subsistence farming in order to sustain a living.

Therefore, the guest worker programmes introduced in the 60s provided a new and unprecedented avenue for economic and social improvement for many Turkish families. At the time, migration was seen as a temporary inconvenience on the way to a – financially – secure future back in Turkey. Such an orientation easily transferred into seeking high monetary returns in the short run without the desire or need for integration into the mainstream. These short-term job contracts further reinforced the “sojourner orientation” of Turks. While employed in low-skill jobs in factories, agriculture, construction or shipyards guest workers were ignorant about the discrimination they had to face. Keeping strong ties with family back in Turkey they aimed to preserve their culture and language until they acquire the necessary assets allowing them to return to their home country (Heath, Rothon and Kilpi 2008).

The inflow of Turkish workers reached its peak in the beginning of the 1970s when more than half a million people left Turkey to find a job in Western Europe. While many lost their jobs and returned to their home country following the economic downturn, many others decided to stay and build a new life in Europe. The possibility of family reunion allowed them to bring their families to join them abroad, while the lack of economic opportunities in Turkey, the negative experience of returners, as well as the educational opportunities in the host country and the relatively cheap international flights, all contributed to their final decision to stay. As a result, there are now an estimated 360,000 Turks in the Netherlands (CBS 2007) and over 161,000 in Austria (Statistik Austria 2009), including the first generation (immigrants themselves) and their offspring (the second generation).

### **Jobs, Attitudes and Educational Aspirations: Commonalities and Differences across the two Countries**

It is evident from the interviews that “sojourner-orientation” was characteristic of both communities upon settlement in their new societies. Given their limited schooling and the lack of knowledge of the local language and the labour market there was no chance of escape from the heavy manual work for the first generation migrants. While the acquisition of financial assets has been the driving force behind the guest worker’s intention to leave their home country, this attitude prevailed even after their settlement in their respective societies. Concentrating all their efforts on the accumulation of financial resources – for a better life upon return to Turkey - the offspring’s education continued to be seen as a waste of time, effort and resources.

[first] my father was here to work, he was only here for the money so the education of my siblings was not important, because we all go back to Turkey. But he sees after years and years, no, we are not going back to Turkey we are going to stay here and we have to invest here, and then - how do you say - the button switched for my father and he has started with the younger siblings – get an education, go to school and do something with your life. (26, male, college student, the Netherlands)

### ***Changing attitudes to education: the Dutch context***

Once they realised they are “here to stay” the focus of Turkish families shifted from present to the future, as long-term plans were suddenly worth making. Therefore, giving up the idea of return to “home” provoked a move from short term capital accumulation to a more long term perspective carrying significant consequences for their offspring. As Turkey was no longer valid as the reference country Turkish families started looking at the Dutch society, using it as their new reference point. Seeing the convertibility of educational qualifications into high-status jobs on the Dutch labour market, more and more Turkish families started to pressurise their offspring to do well in school in order to get ahead. ‘Look at us and what we are doing and what you could be doing if you have a proper education’ [22, male, university student, the Netherlands]. Speaking the Dutch language and being equipped with Dutch credentials their children stood in a good position to make it in the Dutch labour market.

In the Netherlands it’s very easy to earn money if you study. You can do very well financially, have a good job and a good life, there is social security. [21, female, university student, the Netherlands]

Once permanently settled, Turkish families intended to make full use of the opportunity structure of their new society. ‘That’s what I like about the Netherlands there is no restriction you can go and study as far as you want. As long as you push yourself to do so you can reach anything’ [29, female, college graduate, the Netherlands]. Viewing education as a long-term investment into a – financially – secure future for their children transformed the lives of many young people directing them towards professional careers requiring credentials, i.e. “papers” in exchange for “good” jobs and good salaries. ‘They will ask what is on your CV. And if there is no diploma, they won’t hire you’ [29, female,

college student, the Netherlands].

Seeing that schooling and getting their papers is crucial in making it in Dutch society young people were increasingly encouraged to get a degree in order to reach the highest levels of the social ladder, higher than their parents could ever imagine: ‘for my parents university would mean – yes, my child has achieved the highest level which you can achieve’ [23, male, university student, the Netherlands]. Having the chance to convert their own “immaterialised” dreams into reality for their offspring (Zhou and Bankston 1998) slowly transformed the sojourn-oriented parental views into a future-oriented positive attitude where individual investment into education became strongly encouraged.

It is fair to say, that the goals of Turkish families were attainable within the Dutch setting where the chances of being in a particular occupational class were the same for second generation Turks as for the Dutch, the only exception being the very top of the occupational ladder (Tesser and Dronkers 2007). While getting an education continued to be seen as instrumental to reaching the ultimate goal of high-status jobs providing financial security, school success became endorsed by the whole community thus “moving up” didn’t not result in a necessary abandonment of one’s ethnic ties or belonging. Since providing children with good education became slowly the norm and not the exception, families and communities united in sharing resources and providing encouragement, example and support to the younger generations.

Within families, older siblings were often involved in help with homework and advice in all-important school-decisions as well as serving as a role model for siblings and cousins: ‘Because I am the first child they expect me to help, to be an example for my sisters, so they follow me’ [21, female, university student, the Netherlands].

Whenever [my parents] could [help] they would. And the times they couldn’t, they would just turn to my older brother: help him! They would get mad at him, because he had to help. And

they would do the same with me for my little brother. Just basically help each other out, that was the message. [22, male, college student, the Netherlands]

At community level, networks of mentors - often referred to as “brothers” - have been established consisting of educated young people who successfully navigated the Dutch school system and were willing to help others to achieve similar successes. This form of mentoring became deeply ingrained within the community where guidance was sought as well as offered thus creating new, accessible local structures conducive to the educational goals of Turkish families.

The brothers were studying at the university at a time, they could really help us, direct us to a certain education. So basically I was taking their place, because they helped me and they were starting to work and starting their own family, so the younger had to take over the torch from the older generation. [22, male, college student, the Netherlands]

### ***Continuity in educational attitudes: the case of Austria***

But the changes observed in the Netherlands didn't take place in the Austrian setting where not only the first generation but even the children of guest workers continued to face significant ethnic penalties (Kogan 2007). Thus, Turkey, the country they were dreaming of returning to, remained their reference country for many years. As they aimed to return “home” as soon as they acquired the necessary financial assets they maintained a more materialistic way of thinking which did not consider the education of their offspring to be a priority:

I have the feeling that in the Turkish culture education isn't very important. It is not important whether you have a masters or a doctorate, what matters, have you got money or not. That's the

reason why young people do not study at 17 or 18; it's because of this mentality: money, money, money, that's all what matters. [32, male, university graduate, Austria]

In this line of thought an extended school career offered low returns in the short run compared to immediate employment: 'studying and school cost too much and lasts too long until you earn something' [27, female, university graduate, Austria]. By continuously reinforcing their views on the inferiority of education parents were cutting short the time to be spent in the Austrian school system. Owing to this the individual's social mobility was ignored within families where family solidarity and financial security had the highest priority:

Many, many families – at least for a great number of years – thought it is better when my kid starts to work at 15, in a factory or as an apprentice, because then we have three salaries - or four by the second child - and as more money is coming in we can save faster. [27, female, university graduate, Austria]

Children were expected to follow their parents' footsteps and enter the labour market in order to contribute to the family financially. 'You cannot just live at home and study forever' [23, female, college student, Austria]. The sojourn-oriented attitude opposing long school careers was further strengthened by worries over the potential assimilative effects of long term education and subsequent "Austrianisation" of their offspring. Thus young people faced strong resistance from family members and the wider community if they made their minds up to study. Given the strong pressure from parents and the wider surroundings, many young people shun from standing up against their parents' wishes. Thus for some, the most challenging aspect of higher education studies had been to convince their immediate surrounding about their right to study.

‘The most challenging? No, not the school itself or the problems the study would bring, but the problem of convincing my family about it. I had to persuade them, that there is another way, that one doesn’t have to live the same life as one’s parents... So I have gone the opposite way but it took a long time, years, until my family finally agreed to my studies. [28, male, university student, Austria]

In this context, the instant rewards of the wage-pocket prevailed over long-term educational investments. Thus within the Austrian setting individualism was replaced with collectivism safe-guarding the loyalty to one’s family and ethnic community. The pressure for wealth accumulation penetrated even the more ambitious immigrant youth who were challenged by seeing their friends earning money, buying cars and showing off with their material resources thus reducing the individual’s motivation for higher education study, especially when the final labour market outcomes were unpredictable due to the ethnic glass ceiling.

Thus the lack of occupational prospects and the ethnic discrimination at the job market made them turn to their own community and subsequently develop a distinct structure of economic opportunities as an alternative to social advancement within the mainstream. This development is linked to the idea of “ethnic capital” according to which sizable immigrant groups can perform well economically as their members can help each other by offering jobs, buying goods and lending money. Such communities often cushion the shock of acculturation and protect immigrants against outside prejudice (Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Portes 1995). In turn, the ethnic enclave perspective (Zhou 1992) envisages greater opportunities for minority-owned businesses which in turn recruit employees from their own ethnic group thus increasing the employment possibilities of their compatriots. On certain occasions enclaves may become “institutionally complete”

allowing group members to lead their lives entirely within the confines of the ethnic community (Breton 1964; Portes 1995) which may often lead to the emergence of parallel societies.

All right, so why should I support this society, why should I give back anything if the society does not want me here? And I experience it all over again which makes me more and more depressed. As many others feel the same way they say ok, let's build a ghetto, let's be together.[...] It is possible to arrange everything from window cleaning up to car repair and schooling while speaking Turkish, there is no need to 'go out'. This also means that the necessity that one has got to learn German in order to get a good job is not so strong [...] but once staying with the group some things are not possible, one may not study and gain more knowledge, and so on. [30, male, university graduate, Austria]

While ethnically homogenous networks help immigrants in getting jobs and making a living "within", at the same time they also hinder their advancement outside of their niche. By limiting access to information, resources and contacts to those within the Turkish network they potentially exclude other eventually more prosperous opportunities outside of their safety-net. This includes pursuing higher education studies which carry the danger of a weakening solidarity towards the Turkish community together with the fear of assimilation into the mainstream. Thus next to the low returns to education at the labour market the "mobility trap" (Wiley 1967) is likely to be one of the potential causes leading to a low participation in higher education among second generation Turks in the Austrian setting.



## **Discussion**

Turkish guest workers moving to Western Europe for work have travelled a long journey not only geographically but in many other respects. Coming from a traditional agricultural country to a modern knowledge-based society challenged their inner values, norms and attitudes often leading to painful choices and adjustments in their host societies. Although arriving with similar starting positions, the different contexts of settlement transformed their aspirations and attitudes ultimately resulting in different responses to the education of their offspring.

Bourdieu's theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) of capital conversion describes well the processes through which Turkish families' attitudes have evolved over time and how education – slowly overtaking the role of economic capital – blended into their notion of social advancement. It is clear from the interviews that the acquisition of economic capital has been the moving force behind the guest workers intention to move abroad and it continued to prevail even after their decision to settle in their destination countries. When concentrating all their efforts on the accumulation of financial assets first generation Turks were focusing on the only capital accessible to them as there were no other avenues available given their limited schooling and the lack of knowledge of the local language and the labour market. In this line of thought, education was seen as a “waste” of time and especially resources, since all funds had to be put aside for a potential return to Turkey.

But as soon as they realised they are “here to stay”, the focus of Turkish families shifted to their offspring in the Dutch setting. Turkish parents, who experienced blocked mobility in their own lives, started to pressurise their offspring to get ahead once such opportunities became open and accessible (Zhou and Bankston 1998). Speaking the Dutch language and being equipped with Dutch credentials their children stood in a good position to make it in their country of settlement. Thus having the chance to convert their own

“immaterialised” dreams into reality for their children resulted in parents wanting a good education for their offspring leading onto good jobs representing good financial returns on their educational “investments”. By seeing the convertibility of educational qualifications into long-term economic prosperity on the Dutch labour market, more and more Turkish families opted for education instead of early school leaving and marriage. By making education their top priority they heavily relied on social capital (Coleman 1988) from within the community (i.e. sharing relevant information alongside individual tutoring) as well as within their own family (i.e. making use of the experiences and knowledge of elder siblings). Building on the experiences of those who succeeded in getting ahead they utilized their social capital to their best advantage and gained symbolic capital as well. By sending their children to the so-called “prestige fields”, such as law or medicine, parents aimed to increase their own status within the community (Author 2012). Consequently, the portrayal of human capital as a valuable alternative to economic capital – backed up with the necessary support structures from within the community – successfully transformed the futures of the Turkish second generation in the Netherlands, while ensuring the continuity of support for future generations of young people within the Turkish community.

By and large, the described shift in attitudes to education can easily be attributed to the wide range of – educational and work – opportunities available within the host country which led Turks in the Netherlands to prioritise their children’s education and social advancement within the mainstream. At the same time, the unequal employment prospects worked as disincentives for Turks in the Austrian setting resulting in their promotion of ethnic retention, even at the cost of individual social mobility. While Turkish parents embraced the opportunity structure of Dutch society and became eager to make the most of it, Austrian Turks turned to their ethnic communities in order to make a living. By way of favouring social advancement within the mainstream, Turks in the Netherlands emphasized

the key role of education in social mobility for their offspring, while at the same time, the Austrian Turkish community had opted out from investments into education thus maximising the short-term financial benefits of early labour market entry. By building on their own ethnic capital, Turks in Austria developed a distinct structure of economic opportunities as a valued alternative to social mobility within the mainstream, even though it lead to smaller numbers of Turkish students pursuing higher education studies.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Sizable Turkish populations are to be found in Germany, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium and France.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. ‘Studienberechtigungprüfung’ or ‘Berufsreifeprüfung’

<sup>3</sup> More details at: [www.tiesproject.eu](http://www.tiesproject.eu)

<sup>4</sup> Interviewees were solicited through notice boards at universities, personal contacts, mailing lists etc.